Chips, New Islington, Manchester, by Alsop Architects

22 May, 2009 | By Rowan Moore

Standing at the centre of Manchester's almost empty New Islington site, Alsop Architects' Chips carries a great weight of expectation, writes Rowan Moore. Photography by Christian Richters

Developer Urban Splash's New Islington project in Manchester has been so talked about, so celebrated, so published, that it comes as a shock to be reminded that it is mostly not there. It is largely an empty plain awaiting regeneration; nibbled at the edges by FAT's boisterous Woodward Place housing and a quieter terrace by de Metz Forbes Knight. Soil has been decontaminated, and the existing Ashton and Rochdale canals have been extended to create future waterside living. A kind of high street, with fine landscaping by Grant Associates and bus shelters by FAT, stands awaiting buildings to line its sides. The listed remnant of Ancoats Hospital awaits restoration. Otherwise, void.

It will remain so for longer than anyone would have hoped, which gives greater importance to Chips, the new nine-storey block of 142 one, two and three-bedroom flats designed by Alsop Architects. The building must, for now, command the expanse before it. It must be a billboard for a future that will arrive at an unknown date.

Fuelled by Alsop's customary energy, Chips makes a good flagship. It is a big building, 100m long and 14m wide, comparable to the Victorian industrial structures that survive in this area. Giant silk-screened lettering, honouring the names of the region's canals, is equal to the scale of the site, as is the bold division of the nine floors into bands of three, in yellowish, purplish and reddish hues. Shallow wiggles in each layer, misaligning with each other, animate the block. The middle band of the horizontal tricolour, or 'layer cake', is the darkest of the three, and projects at each end into 9m cantilevers in a deliberate attempt to create a sense of heaviness, offset by jittering window rhythms and colourful recesses for balconies.

The sun may not shine much in Manchester, but when it does we sit by the canal

The block has presence enough to mark out a space in the potentially formless zone in which it sits. Aligned with the Ashton Canal, and placed hard against its towpath, Chips reinforces one of the stronger existing elements of the site.
It also successfully subdivides its bulk, which could have been oppressive. The building is not inhabited yet, but it looks like a place of inhabitation.

The purpose of Chips is not just to boost confidence in the New Islington project, and look good while it waits for further development to arrive. Chips is part of a masterplan, developed by Alsop after consultation with residents of the blighted Cardroom estate, which used to stand on this site. A local pub was re-opened for the consultation, having closed because, according to practice founder Will Alsop, ‘no landlord wanted to risk his life by running it’. It was made into a meeting place for professionals and residents, who he says were ‘a vociferous lot’. One of the stronger statements to emerge from residents was that ‘the sun may not shine much in Manchester, but it does sometimes, and when it does we want to sit by canals’.

From this came Alsop’s masterplan, which proposed infiltrating the site with water, and creating a series of ‘fingers’, long, narrow peninsulas carrying oblong apartment blocks, with a scattering of cafés and other facilities to enliven the quays. The areas between the fingers were to be ‘semi-private’ places for the benefit of the apartment blocks. A more public zone would run north-south across the site, alongside the canal. It embodied Alsop’s belief in the importance of a ‘three-dimensional masterplan, one that gives people an idea of what they’re voting for’. It wasn’t quite as extravagant in its imagery as other northern Alsop masterplans – no Tuscan hill town as he proposed for Barnsley, not quite the lake he wanted in Bradford, no giant teddy bears as seen in an image for Middlesbrough – but it was still communicated in vivid and colourful pictures.

Chips is the first of the fingers, and includes the beginnings of the canalside living envisaged in the masterplan. Water will run along the long southern side, the short western end, and halfway along the northern side. An essential element of the hoped-for new community is a double-height, glass-walled, water-surrounded café at the western end, with studio/workshops at ground level.

Meanwhile, on the inside, the architect has sought to make something of the restricted nature of low-cost housing. The brief required every flat to be accessible and Disability Discrimination Act-compliant. Affordable and market housing is distributed randomly and without differentiation. The building's BREEAM environmental assessment rating is excellent, with the help of a combined heat and power plant. Floor-to-ceiling heights, at 2.65m, have a touch of generosity, while space standards are what one of Alsop's architects describes as 'Urban Splash compact'.

Alsop wanted to get away from the series of small rooms flats so often consist of

Beyond this checklist of desirables, Alsop wanted to get away from the standard series of small rooms that such flats tend to consist of. Where possible, the practice installed folding screens rather than walls, to give residents the freedom to open up their spaces if desired. Kitchens and bathrooms were made off-site, and conceived as pods around which the living space might flow. Ceilings are exposed concrete, to reduce the usual sense of flimsiness. Windows are generally large, and the irregular form of the exterior engenders a variety of internal arrangements, so as to escape uniformity.

At best, this approach results in flats with a sense of openness beyond their scale, seen in one type of one-bedder with a long wall that is almost all glass. At worst, some layouts seem awkward, requiring a lot of corridor to circumnavigate the pods. At very worst, a flat at the end of the western cantilever has a 2m-wide strip of timber floor, eroded by structural projections and encroached on by the kitchen, in place of a living space.

Chips is also let down by its realisation, achieved under a design-and-build contract with Urban Splash as construction manager. Wide gaps between the Trespa cladding allow glimpses of galvanised fixings behind. Exposed concrete is blotchy. The Alsop idea of free-floating pods within the flats is compromised by the detail with which they are built. Windows you want to open, don't.

Chips recovers the strengths of some of Alsop’s more successful projects

The current state of New Islington displays the strengths and weaknesses of high-design regeneration, in which Urban Splash specialises. By hiring an architect with personality, the developer has begun to create a distinctive place in an area which could still feel like a big heap of nothingness. It has got itself a masterplan, whose use of water will be, in all probability, delightful. But there is also, in New Islington as a whole, a gap between image and reality, between idea and realisation, between promise and achievement.

For Alsop, Chips recovers the strengths of some of the practice's more successful projects, like the 2000 Stirling Prize-winning Peckham Library in South London. The building's directness, boldness and playfulness are right for the situation, and it is hard to imagine many other contemporary architects dealing better with the scale. The greater the shame, then, that Chips is let down by its detail.

Urban Splash is still ahead of most of the alternatives, as a quick glance at Chips' neighbours - a big, grey prison ship of a block, and a crystalline tower of Ratners quality - confirms. It may be that recent methods of regeneration (in which risk, and with it promotion, is pushed on to the private sector) make a bit of illusion, a bit of style-over-substance, inevitable. But it would be nice to report without any equivocation that the bright, talented people at Alsop and Urban Splash have produced something not just good, but great.

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**Structural engineer** Martin Stockley Associates  
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